

Bataille and the Suspension of Being

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In a letter to Georges Brandes written one year before his mental breakdown, Nietzsche states: “I lay physically for years at the gates of death. This was, positively, a great piece of good fortune. I forgot myself, lived myself down” (PN 94). These thoughts, grounded in the personal experience of someone Bataille considered his philosophical precursor, encapsulate the central problem of Bataille’s corpus. Namely, that the affirmation of a superior form of life-what Bataille calls *la souveraineté*-implies a confrontation with death and a celebration of the forgetfulness of selfhood. Thus, if we were to physically locate the thought of this increasingly influential thinker, we could place it “at the gates of death.” However, for Bataille, as for Nietzsche, the gates of death are also the gates of life-it is always a matter of perspective-and Bataille’s philosophy constantly tampers with these gates’ lock. Unlike Dante, who is only allowed to cross the infernal gates in one direction (the damned souls are warned, *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch’entrate!*), Bataille moves back and forth, attracted and repelled by what lies beyond the gates of death. His philosophy, in fact, escapes oppositional, either/or logic; it is unlocatable because it constitutes a constant transgression of limits. More precisely, Bataille is preoccupied with the unstable in-between space where “sovereign communication” between life and death, knowledge (*savoir*) and unknowing (*non-savoir*), possible and impossible, takes place. To put it differently, his philosophy can be seen as an exploration of the continuities and discontinuities between life and death. In a truly Nietzschean spirit, Bataille looks at life from the perspective of death and at death from the perspective of life in order to evade rationalist dichotomies.

The transgressive dimension of Bataille’s philosophy stems, among other things, from his concept of “sovereign communication” and the challenge to the stability of the limits of the subject it involves. “Eroticism,” “laughter,” “death,” are but some of the instances of sovereign communication and, according to Bataille, these practices involve “[une remise] en cause [de] la totalité de l’homme” (OC VIII 13). At stake is also the conception of being upon which the subject is grounded. In fact, Bataille’s understanding of communication, which takes place only among “sovereign” subjects who are prepared, like Nietzsche, to “forget themselves,” involves, a suspension of the being of subjects in that unstable in-between space that Nietzsche defines as the “gates of death”. Bataille, having drunk from the Dionysian cup, links this liminal space to what he defines as “une grande ivresse” (OC II 247). This expression could be applied to his all of his thought, since he considers it (I should rather say, experiences it, lives it) as a “drunkenness, not [as] a philosophy” (*Essential* 1). Out of this drunkenness and the “disequilibrium” (*Erotism* 31) emerges what Borch-Jacobsen has called “une ontologie de la souveraineté” (27).

In the best of circumstances the author would follow Bataille's drunken sovereign, who dances on a narrow tightrope, suspended between life and death, in order to grasp his ontology of sovereignty. But this is impossible because I am not drunk, not dancing, nor can I truly forget myself. In this, I remain a spectator, on the safe shore of life, reason and discourse. The image of the tightrope is, of course, not mine; it originates with Nietzsche and gets picked up by Bataille to describe his life: "I see myself slowly reaching a limit. With anguish waiting for me on all sides, walking a narrow tightrope" (*Essential* 143). Bataille's philosophy is experiential and to approach it solely through reason involves the risk of killing its spirit. Thus, if reason protects us from the *abîme*, it also protects us from Bataille's "*grande ivresse*." But my approach will nonetheless be systematic and "sober." It will in a sense be distant from sovereignty, perhaps even sovereignty's opposite: slavery.

Why not then remain silent? This would at least honor Bataille in a way congruent with his philosophy (he embraced the Medieval distich: *O si tacuisses, Philosophus mansisses*). The German indologist Heinrich Zimmer, referring to the sacred (Bataille's underlying theme), once said something the French philosopher would have thoroughly agreed with and which somehow justifies our project: "The best things cannot be said" "[. . .] the second best are misunderstood" (cf. Campbell, back cover; my translation).

In the following I will endeavor to clarify the notion of "communication" in order to dispel misunderstandings and hopefully improve the chances to approach the "best things" inherent in Bataille's thought. More precisely, I will map out some of Bataille's fundamental concepts, such as "*souveraineté*," "*Rien*," "*erotisme*," "*rire*," "*mort*" in order to capture, even if only provisionally, the unstable foundations which sustain this voluntarily disordered thought.

Back to slavery! Although Bataille's spirit is unquestionably Nietzschean, he paradoxically finds the philosophical premises that sustain his vision of the subject in Kojève's anthropomorphic reading of the Hegelian, master-slave dialectic. Bataille, in fact, unlike Nietzsche, does not posit an excess of being (a "fullness" or "self-overflowing") at the basis of human life, but rather a "principle of insufficiency" (*Essential* 32). Bataille is here close to a Kojévian/Hegelian conceptualization of the human subject: "The I of Desire is an emptiness," affirms Kojève (4). It is this fundamental insufficiency of being, or "lack," which compels the Hegelian subject to start that "fight to the death for pure prestige" (*Kampf auf Leben und Tod*) (13).

And yet, starting from two opposed conceptions of the subject, Hegel and Nietzsche seem to agree, for a brief moment, on a point around which the totality of Bataille's thought pivots. Both German philosophers, in fact, advocate the necessity of a confrontation with death (one via an experience rooted in the body, the other via abstract reason) in order to reach a superior form of life which they both define in terms of sovereignty. This superficial similarity, however, should not obscure the fact that Nietzsche and Hegel speak from antithetical perspectives. Nietzsche is physically seized by death whereas the Hegelian master voluntarily encounters it. Nietzsche promotes a philosophy of life rooted in affirmation⁽¹⁾ while Hegel advocates a philosophy of death rooted in negation. Nietzsche promotes a "forgetfulness" of the self, but Hegel advocates the necessity for recognition of the self (*Anerkennung*). Bataille's philosophy arises at the intersection between these two opposing paths; his thought is the product of the generative tensions which stem from this unlikely crossroad.

Bataille's thought occupies an unstable position between, on the one hand, a philosophy of life and a transgression which finds its source in a Dionysian experience of excess and, on the other, a philosophy of death and work solidly grounded, via Kojève, in Hegelian dialectics. At times, these two poles do not seem mutually exclusive but rather complementary.⁽²⁾ Thus, at the end of *Erotism*, he writes: "I have personally felt it necessary to accept the difficulties of both paths, the path of transgression as well as the path of work" (261). The "path of transgression" cannot be subjected to a totalizing metadiscourse since that would imply a delimitation, through reason, of a practice that not only exceeds reason but that is also inimical to it. This accounts for the experiential dimension that characterizes *Sur Nietzsche*—a book on the author's experience rather than on Nietzsche's thought. For Bataille in fact, "[p]arler de Nietzsche n'a du sens que du dedans" (qtd. in Sasso, 19). On the other hand, Bataille is aware of the necessity of the "discipline" (*Erotism* 259) inherent in what he contemptuously defines as "specialized philosophy" (254).⁽³⁾ Hence, when Bataille states that "philosophy finds itself in an impasse" (259) he is implicitly confronting the contradiction that sustains his own work: the necessity to convey an experience of excess that transcends language and meaning and belongs to the realm of the *non-savoir*, through the disciplined (although non-systematic) language of philosophy to which, *volente o nolente*, he belongs.

If we return to the Hegelian/Kojévian definition of the subject we cannot fail to notice that Bataille's terminology is unquestionably Kojévian. "Man must be an emptiness, a nothingness" (38), writes Kojève; Bataille echoes this: "*le sujet que je suis, n'est RIEN*" (OC VIII 408) or, "*la souveraineté n'est RIEN*" (OC VIII 300). However, as these concepts unfold, differences start to appear. Kojève in fact immediately adds that man "annihilates Being in order to *realize itself* at the expense of Being" (38 my italics). The subject, for both Kojève and Hegel is inscribed within a project whose *telos* is its self-realization in time (the attainment of self-consciousness). Hence, within the frame of Hegelian dialectic, the master's confrontation with death should serve a purpose: the master confronts death *in order* to be recognized, that is to say, to "realize itself" and I would add, preserve and ultimately find himself, within the stability of the field of representation.

To put it differently, Hegel's master remains entrapped in what Bataille defines as "*le piège du moi*" (qtd. in Sasso 131): "I am, therefore you are not," thinks the Hegelian master. Hegel's philosophy, for Bataille, consists in "*un effort ramassant l'homme en lui-même*" (*Le Coupable* V 351); it is a philosophy that encloses being within the limits of the subject rather than opening the subject up in relationship with an outside. In brief, Hegelian dialectics is grounded on an epistemic closure. Thus, when we begin to think that Bataille's sovereign conflates with Hegel's *Herrschaft*, we find ourselves thrown off balance, at the very antipodes of dialectics. Nothing, in fact, could be further from Bataille's notion of sovereignty. Bataille's concepts are slippery insofar as he takes them from Hegel but places them in his own (Nietzschean) syntax. He makes Hegelian concepts function in a different language, and their meaning drastically changes in translation.

Bataille, in a Nietzschean undertone, writes that sovereignty is "*au-delà de l'utilité*" (OC VIII 248) and he roots it in the "*instant*," that is to say, outside the sphere of time. The rhetoric is not only Nietzschean, so is the content. In *Ecce Homo* he writes: "Mon expérience ignore complètement ce que c'est que 'vouloir quelque chose, y travailler ambitieusement, viser un

‘but,’ ou la réalisation d’un désir” (qtd. *Sur Nietzsche*). It is in Nietzsche’s *experience* rather than in Hegel’s *thought* that Bataille finds the source of his conception of sovereignty. For Bataille, as for Nietzsche, the experiential cannot be disentangled from the ontological.

In fact, although I refer to Nietzsche’s autobiography, Bataille does not only ground his philosophy in Nietzsche’s experience, his ontology is an extension of Nietzsche’s. Bataille acknowledges the importance of Nietzsche throughout his work. He writes “[a] peu d’exceptions près ma compagnie sur terre est celle de Nietzsche” (*Sur Nietzsche* 38). Or, even more explicitly, as he first discovered Nietzsche in 1923: “Pourquoi continuer de réfléchir, pourquoi envisager d’écrire, puisque ma pensée-toute ma pensée-avait été si pleinement, si admirablement exprimée” (*OC* VIII 562). Such affirmations should be taken seriously. Yet, at the same time, we should not disregard the strong Hegelian influence. The task at hand is to engage with it Bataille’s Hegelianism in order to expose its problematic dimensions. Let me hasten to add that the same could be done with respect to Nietzsche’s influence.

The etymological link between “utility,” what serves a purpose (*servir à quelque chose*), and servility (*servitude*, the practice of the slave), from Latin *servire*, from *servus* a slave, justifies Bataille’s choice to relegate the Hegelian *Herrschaft* to the domain of servitude. The Hegelian master finds himself in a condition of “*attente de soi*” (*OC* VIII 266) since what is at stake for him is the realization of self-consciousness in time. He is master insofar as he confronts death, but the fact that death is confronted in view of an end, deprives the master of his sovereignty. In fact, according to Bataille, such a project (and indeed any project) characterizes slavery rather than sovereignty. Hence, it is not surprising that Bataille’s sovereign assumes the characteristics of an anti-(Hegelian/Kojévian) master, which is also an anti-slave: “Sovereignty,” he writes, “can only exist on condition that it should never assume power, which is action, the primacy of the future over the present moment (*Essential* 190). Depriving *Herrschaft* from “power,” “action” and “teleology” involves bringing the dialectical process to a halt. Bataille’s understanding of communication, thus, troubles dialectical thought.

Bataille’s concept of sovereignty is instrumental in elucidating the fundamental discrepancy between dialectics and communication. It should first be noted that Bataille relegates Hegel’s philosophy (as well as Hegel himself) to the realm of “work”: “Hegel élaborant la philosophie du travail (c’est le Knecht, l’esclave émancipé, le travailleur qui dans *La Phénoménologie* devient Dieu) a supprimé la chance-et le rire” (*Le Coupable* V 341). Bataille, in order to affirm the Dionysian themes of chance and laughter, needs to exclude the slave from his notion of communication.⁽⁴⁾ For him, both “chance” and “laughter” are in fact linked to a disruption of the limits of the subject, hence to death.

And, as we know, the slave is characterized by his non-confrontation with death. In order to affirm death in life, Bataille needs to renounce the figure of the slave. Thus, to the extent that we are correct to assume that Bataille considers the Hegelian master a slave (if the positive turns out to be a negative), then much of Hegel must be discarded. Yet, as Derrida points out, Bataille’s engagement with Hegel is “interminable” (253). The same can be said with respect to Nietzsche. Is Bataille’s thought then a Nietzschean dialectics-that is to say a *contradictio in abjectio*? Reading Bataille involves a constant back and forth movement between Nietzsche and Hegel. This movement does not however take the shape of a static circle (from Nietzsche to Hegel and

back to Nietzsche) but rather of a spiral which represents the development of Bataille's own original thought.

Bataille's notion of communication involves a dialectic with two positives (hence a non-dialectic) where two sovereigns confront death not in view of an end but as an end in itself: "confronting death," in fact, "puts the subjects at stake—"l'être en eux-mêmes [est] mis en jeu" (*Sur Nietzsche* 61). Further, Bataille affirms that "[p]ersonne n'est-un instant-souverain qui ne se perde" (*OC* VIII 429). It is the Nietzschean self-forgetfulness that is here evoked; a self-forgetfulness which implies a transgression of the limits of both communicating subjects. Again, for Bataille "[l]a 'communication' n'a lieu qu'entre deux êtres mis en jeu-déchirés, suspendus, l'un et l'autre penchés au-dessus de leur néant" (*Sur Nietzsche* 62). However, if according to Nietzsche, self-forgetfulness takes place in solitude, for Bataille it necessitates the presence of an "other."⁵ Communication in fact, asks for "deux êtres mis en jeu" who participate in what he defines as "*une fête immotivée*" (*Sur Nietzsche* 31). There the sovereign loses himself (se perde) with the other, through the other, in the other, in a process of "mutual laceration" (*Essential* 105) which is simultaneously tragic and ludic.

The emphasis on the other is Hegelian, but unlike dialectics, communication does not confront the subject with an object (*Gegen-stand*, something that stands against the subject). As Bataille puts it (apparently echoing Baudelaire), communication takes place with "un semblable," "mon frère" (*OC* VIII 289). And he adds: "Cela suppose la communication de sujet à sujet" (*OC* VIII 288). Bataille's notion of communication is not based upon a "violent hierarchy" (Derrida's term) but rather upon egalitarianism. Moreover, transgressing the limits of the subject implies that the two subjects already possess (*in potential*) the characteristics of sovereignty. Hence, the status of sovereign is not achieved as a result of a fight to the death, but requires the subject to be open to an other who is outside the limits of the self.

Derrida speaks of the "trembling" to which Bataille submits Hegelian concepts (253). This trembling, I would argue, has its source in Nietzsche (6): "The figs fall from the trees" says Zarathustra, "they are good and sweet, and when they fall, their red skins are rent. A north wind am I unto ripe figs" (qtd. in *Philosophy* 135). If we apply this passage to Bataille's philosophy, we could say that inherent in this "fall" is an explosion of Hegelian concepts, and in particular, as we have seen, the notion of *Herrschaft*. Further, communication, for Bataille, involves a similar "fall" which rents (*déchire*) the skin of the subjects (their limits) exposing the red flesh which lies beneath the skin. According to the French philosopher, Nietzsche's critique of the subject is more radical than Hegel's, since, as he puts it in "Hegel, la mort et le sacrifice," Hegel's philosophy, and I would add Kojève's interpretation of it, is "une théologie, où l'homme aurait pris la place de Dieu" (*OC* XII 329). Hegel's "theology" preserves the identity of the subject. Now, Bataille makes his position to this "theology" clear as he writes: "I don't believe in God—from the inability to believe in self" (*Essential* 10). By establishing a direct link between the death of the subject and the death of God, Bataille extends his critique of "beings" into the larger, ontological, critique of "Being." Implicit in this theoretical move is the articulation of the ontology of sovereignty.

Bataille's philosophy is Nietzschean insofar as it is grounded in experience and in the immanence of the body. Communication, for Bataille is first and foremost a bodily affair. Hence

the interrogation of the limits of the subject starts from an interrogation of what we could call the “gates,” or openings of the body: the mouth, the vagina, the anus and the eyes are for Bataille central places for philosophical investigation because at these gates, the integrity of the subject is questioned; its limits can be transgressed. They are spaces of transition where a “glissement hors de soi” (*OC* VIII 246) can take place. These bodily openings, which Bataille also defines as “blessures,” (*Sur Nietzsche* 64) found his conception of the sovereign subject. In fact, each “blessure” can be linked to a specific dimension of communication which obsesses Bataille. His central themes match different bodily openings: the mouth connects to laughter; the vagina to eroticism; the eyes to tears; the anus to the excrements which he links to death. Through these openings the subject is traversed by different fluxes and its integrity, totality and stability is challenged. They allow for the possibility of a *glissement* of the subject’s being. The same could be said of Bataille’s corpus: it is a unitary entity, which, like a body, escapes the totalizing temptation of closure.

Despite the fact that Bataille defines sovereignty in terms of the Kojévian/Hegelian “nothingness” (Bataille’s *Rien*), his conception of communication is built upon the Nietzschean ontological distinction between the Dionysian and the Apollonian. In fact, the ontological movement that takes place in communication “exige que l’on glisse” (*OC* VI 158) from an “insufficient” and “discontinuous” being to a reality of “continuity” that transcends binary oppositions (*Erotism* 13-14). To put it more simply, communication introduces a movement from the “many” to the “One”; from a “discontinuity of being” to a “continuity of being;” from separate “beings” to a common ontological ground (“Being”). The source of Bataille’s ontology is clear: it stems from Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* which in turn, is construed upon Schopenhauer’s distinction between will and representation. “As a sailor sits in a small boat in a boundless raging sea,” writes Schopenhauer, “surrounded on all sides by heaving mountainous waves, trusting to his frail vessel; so does the individual man sit calmly in the middle of a world of torment, trusting to the *principium individuationis*” (*Birth* 21) .(7)

Communication, for Bataille, as the Dionysian for Nietzsche, involves the shattering of the *principium individuationis*, a tearing down of the veil of Maya which constitutes, what Bataille calls, with a blink of the eye to Schopenhauer, the “*illusion* of a being which is isolated” (*Essential* 10; my emphasis). Communication, thus, involves an opening of the subject to the larger ground of Being. The sovereign’s boat is constantly leaking. Yet, in order for communication to take place, the boat needs to keep floating. That is to say that for transgression to take place, the limits of the subject need to be preserved (*Erotism* 63; Foucault 34). The being of the sovereign subject is suspended upon the *abîme*-what Bataille also calls “une réalité plus vaste” (*OCII* 246)-which means that the subject neither dwells safely within the limits of the “small, insufficient boat” of individuation, nor within the depth of the undifferentiated “raging sea,” but in the space of contact in-between the two spheres. This precision is key in order to delineate the originality of Bataille’s ontology of sovereignty.

Bataille’s conception of the communicating subject (i.e., of sovereignty) walks a thin line between its self-dissolution and its self-preservation. Hence the idea that he is above all a thinker of limits or borders. The sovereign’s being, in fact, is “suspended” on the “*bord de l’abîme*” (*Coupable* V 355) but never actually falls, except, of course, in death. Hence, for Bataille, “[i]l s’agit d’approcher la mort” that is to say, the *abîme*, or the continuity of being, “d’aussi près

qu'on peut l'endurer" (337-338). The sovereign subject confronts death while preserving his life. His being is placed at the border between life and death. Hence, if Bataille defines philosophy as "existence striving to reach its limits" (*Essential* 146), it should be specified that the being of the subject is not found beyond its limits, as his use of "existence" seems to suggest (Ek-sistenz) since that would imply a total dissolution of the subject. Bataille's philosophy of transgression implies the preservation of the limits of the subject so that the sovereign can experience and endure death in life.

The tension between self-expenditure (Nietzsche's *Verschwendung*) and self-preservation (linked to Hegel's *Anerkennung*) is analogous to the movement of a moth that is first attracted by the fire of a candle and subsequently distances itself from the fire in order to preserve its life.⁽⁸⁾ This repeated back and forth movement recapitulates the movement of communication and is responsible for the underlying tension which traverses Bataille's philosophy. It is an inner (bodily) drive that attracts the moth to death and not, as it is the case for Hegel's master, a reasoned project in view of an end (recognition). The moth's self-sacrifice, in fact, is perfectly useless (it serves no purpose) and hence is truly sovereign. Bataille would call it "une négativité sans emploi."

Or, as he says with respect to eroticism in his first and last interview before he died, "it is purely squandering, an expenditure of energy for itself" (in *Essential* 220). This movement forwards, towards the flame of self-dissolution (which takes place in death, eroticism, laughter...) and its retreat backwards, towards life and the limits it involves, epitomizes Bataille's notion of communication. A practice which for Bataille seems to have the characteristic of a fort-da game in which the subject is not in control of the movement. This movement, Bataille writes in the Preface to *Madame Edwarda*, happens "malgré nous" (III 11). Thus conceived the sovereign accepts the place of a toy in the hands of a child playing—a definition similar to Heraclitus' vision of life, which he defines as "a child at play, moving pieces in a game (Fragment 52, in GM 149). This view of communication is both tragic and joyful; violent and useless. A joyful tragedy, which challenges the limits of the subject; that puts the subject's being *en jeu*.

If Bataille is deeply fascinated by death, decay and the dissolution of the subject in a continuity of being, he escapes the temptation to embrace death at the expense of life. His definition of eroticism sums up this fundamental tension: "Eroticism," he writes, "is assenting to life up to the point of death" (*Eroticism* 11). This applies not only to eroticism but also to all communicating activities such as laughter, play, tears, and ultimately to the ethos that sustains the totality of Bataille's philosophy. If Kojève defines dialectics as a "negating-negativity" (5), Bataille's communication can be read as an *affirmative negativity*. In fact, death is confronted and even invoked, but what is found in death is the ultimate affirmation of life. Negation of the integrity (the limits) of the subject leads to a radical affirmation of life.

And if in the Preface to *Madame Edwarda*, Bataille can affirm "l'identité de l'être et de la mort" (OC III 10), let us also note that the identity of being and death is realized in life. Faithful to Nietzsche, Bataille does not become a negator of the will; a negator of life; a pessimist, a Buddhist or worse, a nihilist (some of the derogatory terms used by Nietzsche to retrospectively define his first and last master). Bataille remains truthful to life. While the ontological premises grounding sovereignty are taken from Schopenhauer (via Nietzsche), Bataille's conclusions are

diametrically opposed to Nietzsche's first master. In fact, Bataille's philosophy can be seen as an affirmation of the will (he operates an inversion of values) through Dionysian practices (included sexuality which Schopenhauer condemned) that put the subject in touch with the ultimate ground of being, without dissolving him/her in it.

It is tempting to relegate Bataille's conception of being to a traditional metaphysics which privileges the One (continuity) over the many (discontinuity). However, it should be noted that his conception of being remains "suspended" in an unstable, undetermined, position between these two ontological alternatives. Moreover, this suspension is not a static one, since the being of sovereigns in communication constantly slips (*glisse*) in and out of each other. Hence, when critics of Bataille identify his conception of being with specific instances of communication (Sasso speaks of "une ontologie du jeu"; Borch-Jacobsen of "rire de l'être") it should be clear that the being they are addressing is not the ultimate metaphysical ground (i.e. Schopenhauer's will) but rather the "*grande ivresse*" which allows for a *glissement de l'être* to take place. Bataille deals not so much with Dionysos but rather with the Dionysian practices of laughter, play or eroticism which set being in movement towards a continuity never fully realized. Thus conceived, being is a process, or as Bataille says, a "movement" (*Essential* 139). Bataille can, therefore, be counted as a philosopher of becoming although he bases his ontology upon the unitary ground of being familiar to both the mystical tradition and the philosophical tradition that privileges sameness (the One) over difference (many). The identity of beings, for Bataille, escapes any static delimitation since being (that is to say, sovereign communication) consists precisely in the dynamic transgression of these limits.

Given Bataille's effort to avoid the trap of pessimism and nihilism, one wonders why he decides to stick to the negative Hegelian/Kojévian category of nothingness (*Rien*) in order to define the being of sovereignty. We have seen how the category of "nothingness" finds a justification in a fundamental "insufficiency" of being which, according to Bataille, characterizes the discontinuous subject. Yet, it could be objected that in sovereign communication the subject opens up to a reality which transcends the individual limitations and which eradicates the subject from the realm of limitation, discontinuity and insufficiency. Bataille, however, goes further in the opposite direction. In fact, his definition of nothingness does not only invest sovereignty but also that "*réalité plus vaste*" which sustains it: "En tant que sujet je ne suis RIEN," he writes, and immediately adds "au sein de l'immensité qui n'est RIEN" (*OC* VIII 410). Nietzsche's Dionysos is deprived of affirmation and relegated to a Kojévian/Hegelian nothingness. In order to grasp Bataille's use of this Kojévian/Hegelian concept we have to understand how it functions within its proper economy. To put it differently, we need to understand from which perspective, from which side of the gates, to return to our initial image, this "*réalité plus vaste*" is considered and defined.

The following passage might help us situate Bataille's perspective on the nothingness of being. He writes: "Je ne prends pas néant dans le sens absence d'être au sens fort, mais l'expérience qu'un être en particulier fait de son absence" (*OC* VI 433). It is from the perspective of the single, discontinuous and insufficient individual (*un être particulier*) that Bataille is speaking. That is to say, it is from the perspective of the *principium individuationis* that *l'immensité* appears to be nothing (and I use the term appearance having in mind Schopenhauer's distinction between phenomena and will). In brief, Bataille cannot avoid speaking from the perspective of life and

reason. It is a negative terminology because the language of reason is limited and cannot address what is beyond representation. To put it differently, speaking of what transcends rational knowledge, Bataille adopts a strategic terminology that is reminiscent of the path of negative mystical theology. Since “*l’immensité*” (i.e. the continuity of being) cannot be known positively by what it is, it can be hinted at by what it is not, namely, the realm of the particular, insufficient and discontinuous being. It is the experience the latter has of its absence, of its non-being; of its nothingness. This negative path corresponds, to use Zimmer’s terminology, to the second best things after silence (what cannot be said).

Bataille’s philosophical focus on communication allows him to develop an ontology of suspension which is also an ontology of movement. Is it an onto-theology? If it is so, it is a very unstable and non-dogmatic one. Bataille, in fact, links all the communicating activities to the realm of the sacred. The sacred, for him, is not a static category but is linked to the sacrifice of the limits of the self. It arises out of their transgression. Sacrifice, as the etymology suggests (from Latin *sacrificium*, from *sacer* holy + *facere* to make) is linked to *fare*, to an activity or practice which generates the sacred. As he puts it elsewhere in relationship to laughter, the sacred is this “leap” (*saut*) which allows two subjects who are ready to confront the *non-savoir*, to transgress their limits in order to move from discontinuity to continuity: they are ready to jump into the unknown, which transcends their individual limitation. In brief, the sovereign subject avoids the stability of closure: s/he is constantly in-between, constantly moving back and forth between discontinuity of being and continuity of being, life and death, knowledge and non-knowledge, reason and experience, Hegel and Nietzsche. There is no closure to this movement of being. Bataille’s philosophy remains suspended in a position of constant disequilibrium. And it is because a final equilibrium (stasis) is never achieved, because the sovereign, drunk, subject never stops vacillating on the tightrope, that s/he avoids falling into nothingness and is obliged to move back and forth, suspended on that *abîme* which is nothing and yet everything. (9)

NOTES

1. In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche writes: “For this should be thoroughly understood; it was during those years in which my vitality reached its lowest point that I ceased from being a pessimist” (in *The Philosophy* 40).

2. Bataille writes: “Rire et penser me parurent d’abord *se compléter*” (VIII 562). What Bataille says in response to his reading of Bergson can be extended to the totality of his thought. And yet, as we shall see, this juxtaposition of laughter and thought, experience and reason, is deeply problematic.

3. Hegel according to Bataille, belongs to this category. In fact, he writes that “Hegel’s specialized discipline...assembles ideas, but at the same time cuts those assembled ideas off from experience” (*Erotism* 255). The tension between thought and experience parallels the tension between Bataille’s two incompatible masters: Nietzsche and Hegel. Bataille does not want to sacrifice either pole. Hence the generative tension inherent in his thought.

4. I am aware that my language seems to inscribe Bataille’s thought within the realm of a project (see my use of “in order”). By tracing the logical connections between his concepts I imbue them

with a teleological drive which is hardly present in the French philosopher's thought. Laughter, chance or eroticism are experiences which precede their rational explication. For Bataille, as we shall see, they constitute the essence of being which precedes and is beyond discursive/rational thought. Since my purpose is explicative I cannot seem to avoid this methodological fallacy. Every commentator of Bataille is confronted with this impasse. Some manage to adopt a "Bataillean" 's spirit better than others (see Borch-Jacobsen).

5. "The whole of my *Zarathustra*" Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo* "is a dithyramb in honor of solitude" (*Philosophy* 48). However, it should also be said that despite Nietzsche's constant glorification of solitude, there is a deep longing for communication pervading his work. To put it differently, his work is this communication with a generation that was yet to come and to which Bataille belongs.

6. The title of Derrida's essay on Bataille, "From Restricted to General Economy," implies a similar movement (from Hegel to Nietzsche). "*Grösse Ökonomie*" is indeed a Nietzschean concept and is the source of Bataille's understanding of "general economy." Moreover, as Nietzsche puts it, this economy "is not afraid of high prices, of squandering (*Verschwendung*)" (in *Staten* 10). Bataille's definition of sovereignty is grounded upon this general/*grösse* economy; self-expenditure being just Bataille's translation of Nietzsche's *Verschwendung*. Moreover, it could be added that Foucault's reading of Bataille's transgression purely in affirmative terms ("Transgression," according to Foucault, contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being" 35) also betrays Foucault Nietzschean reading of Bataille. Although I am not as quick to dismiss the negative as Foucault is, my reading also privileges the Nietzschean undercurrent in Bataille's thought.

7. Schopenhauer's image of the boat in the tempest obviously impressed Bataille since he constantly recurs to nautical images to describe sovereignty. Hence he says in *Inner Experience* that experience "leads to no harbor" (3). Elsewhere he speaks of the disequilibrium introduced by communication in terms of une "*tempête qui s'est déchaînée*" (II 246). And again: "*Je suis sûr que le vaisseau est démâté*" (in *Sasso* 140).

8. This image is used in Sufism to illustrate the mystic's relation to God. Inherent in such a metaphor is a lack of teleological drive (since the attraction is rooted in the body rather than in the mind) that Bataille would have probably approved. In fact, one of his objections to being defined as a "nouveau mystic" (Sartre's derogatory definition of Bataille) was that inherent in mysticism, like in dialectics, there is a teleology, a goal to accomplish, a purpose.

9. It could be added that Bataille's philosophical position in Twentieth Century French Philosophy is also a suspended one. In fact, his intermediary position between Hegel and Nietzsche mirrors, to a certain extent, the larger division in twentieth century philosophical thought, between what Descombes has called the "generation of the three H's" (9) and the philosophy of suspicion heavily influenced by Nietzsche that characterizes the post '68 generation. In this sense, it could be said that Bataille's philosophy, and more specifically his notion of communication, articulates some of the main tensions that characterize a century of philosophical debates (see affirmation/negation; life/death; difference/identity;

experience/discourse; absence/presence...). His thought be read as a problematic transition between two philosophical generations.

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